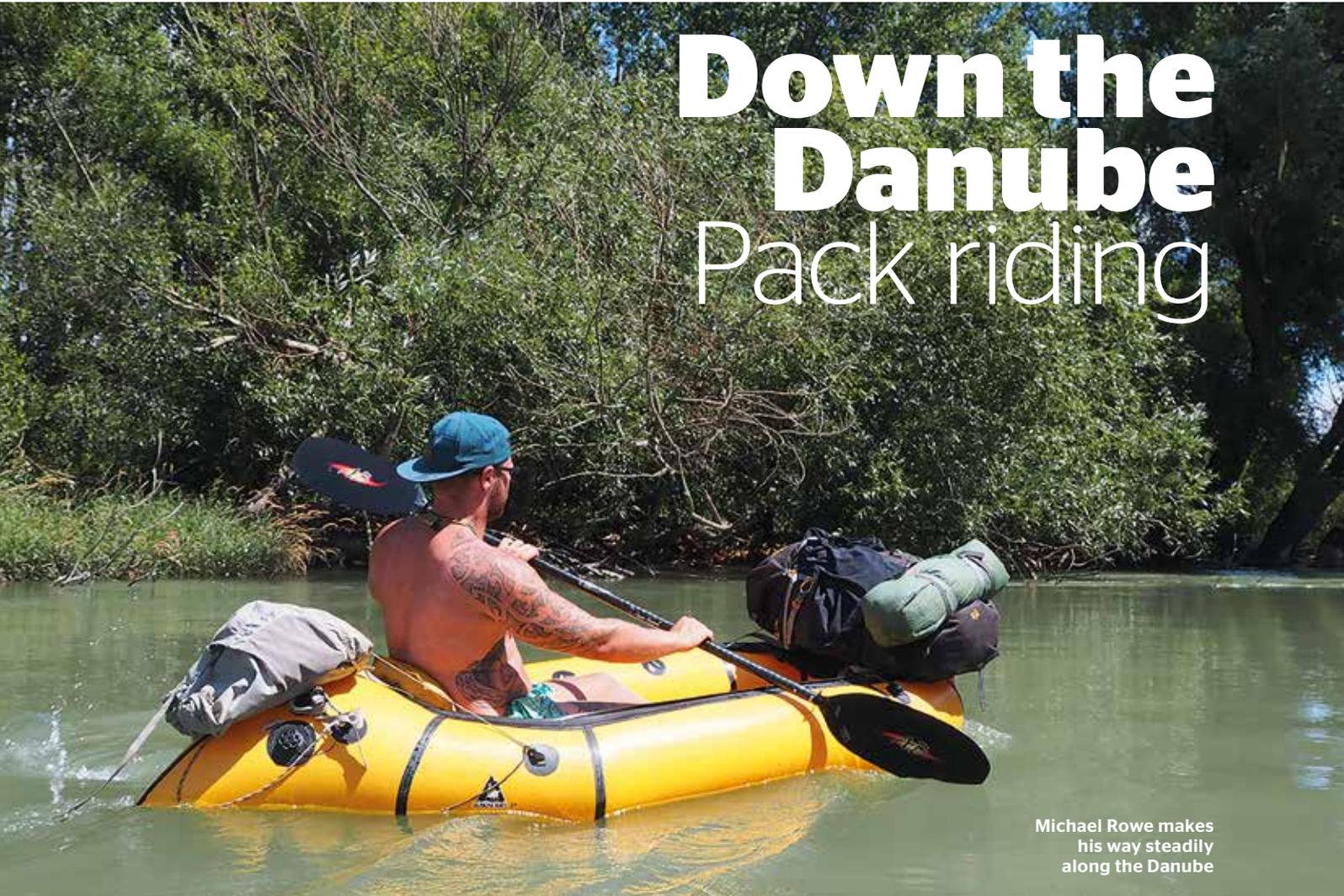


Down the Danube

Pack riding



Michael Rowe makes his way steadily along the Danube

Earlier this year, a group of packrafters set out on an epic endeavour to paddle across Europe, navigating their way from Ireland all the way to the distant Black Sea. Chris Fitch joined them as they made their way through Slovakia and northern Hungary

Back in April, Michael Rowe left the wet and windy west coast of Ireland to embark upon an epic feat: a pan-European expedition by inflatable packraft. Facilitated by the international non-profit tour company Ninth Wave Global, based in Campache, Mexico, he aspired to lead a diverse group of rafters right the way across Europe, through 14 different countries. 'I started looking into doing what I'd consider a full crossing, so from pretty much the most Western point to the most Eastern point that I could find,' he explains. 'Going eastward and seeing the differing cultures as we move out of our comfort zone into eastern Europe.'

From Bundoran, County Donegal, they braved severe gales to cross the country via the Shannon river and Grand Canal down to the outskirts of Dublin. After crossing over to Wales, they navigated their way down the Severn and then the Thames all the way to London, before catching a bus over to Calais, where they slipped into the canals of northern France. From here they continued heading southeast, eventually joining the Danube, which carried them across south Germany, Austria, and, by midsummer, into Slovakia. Ahead from this point lay Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and, finally – an anticipated six months and 3,000 miles since leaving Bundoran – Ukraine, and the finish line on the Black Sea.

Key to the expedition is that a significant proportion of the journey takes place within the borders of the European Union, allowing Rowe and his crew a relatively fluid progression as they navigate their way along the continents' rivers, crossing border after border as they go. It's been an ideal opportunity to reflect on the modern issues affecting the EU, and the nature of such effortless freedom of movement. 'Europe seems to be disintegrating

a little bit at the moment,' observes Rowe. 'The EU was set up to be a shining light of what's possible when we stand side by side. So much has happened recently that we've kind of forgotten that, so we need big, bold gestures to remind us what a beautiful experiment this really is.' This expedition is intended to be such a gesture.

INTO HUNGARY

Perched upon a grassy bank in the shadow of the Starý most – a reconstruction of what was once the oldest bridge in the Slovakian capital city of Bratislava – I find myself carefully unfolding an assortment of colourful rubbery nylon. Once inflated, it miraculously turns into a number of packrafts, upon which we will trust our lives against the power of the Danube.

Studiously, we strap our various rucksacks, duffel bags and drybags to the front of our respective rafts, before, one by one, carrying them down to the river bank, dropping them into the water, then quickly hopping aboard. Following in the confident footsteps of my team mates, I cautiously lower myself into the cockpit of my raft, place a firm grip on my paddle, then cast off into the intimidatingly wide river.

Through Bratislava, the Danube acts as a major trade route for goods in and out of central Europe. Hence, the waterway is filled with far larger vessels than the tiny inflatable crafts we've taken to the water in, bobbing up and down like toys in the middle of a vast ocean. Rowe calls out for us all to stick together, and stay close to the far right of the channel so as to avoid any collisions with passing freight ships or tour boats, where we would be quite certain to come off far worse.

With the wind on our backs, it's not long before we've left the grey concrete and looming smokestacks of Bratislava far behind, to be replaced by thick greenery on both sides of the river. After around two hours of paddling, the pace of the water slows significantly, as the channel gradually widens to almost a mile across. The decayed remains of dead trees begin to emerge from beneath the surface of the water, the creeping fingers of enormous forests long since drowned. We've encountered the Gabčíkovo hydro-electric dam.

First dreamt up during the days of 1970s communist rule in both Hungary and neighbouring Czechoslovakia, this huge piece of infrastructure was originally supposed to be the cross-border Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam. However, revolution and the collapse of communism in Hungary in 1989 was accompanied by intense protests by environmentalists concerned about the dam's impact on the



The Elizabeth Bridge crosses the Slovakian border with Hungary

BUILDING BRIDGES

Approached from either bank, the Elizabeth Bridge (Erzsébet híd), first opened in 1892, appears as an uninspiring, non-descript, green-tinged piece of central European infrastructure between two provincial industrial towns – Komárno in Slovakia and Komárom in Hungary – a mere tool for crossing the impasse that is the Danube. And yet, viewed from the perspective of the water, it takes on an entirely new dimension. Now it becomes a powerful connection of two different lands, peoples, communities. It becomes a symbolic holding hands between the two countries whose sovereignties it enters. No wonder, therefore, that they now call it the 'bridge of friendship'. Similarly, 30 miles further east down the river towards Budapest, the Maria-Valeria bridge, between Štúrovo, Slovakia, and Esztergom, Hungary, first built in 1895, then destroyed by German soldiers in 1944, was a symbolic re-bonding step of the European project when it was reconstructed in 2001.

highly biodiverse surrounding wetlands, which eventually saw Hungary pull out of the deal entirely.

Nevertheless, construction continued, and the new reservoir was opened in 1992, now supplying around ten per cent of modern Slovakia's nationwide electricity. Legal disputes over Hungary's decision to pull out of the initial treaty continue to rumble through the International Court of Justice to this day.

MOSONI DUNA

After hauling our rafts and bags over the top of the dam by the fading light of the setting sun, we make camp in a patch of rocky, grassy earth overrun with crickets. The next day, promises Rowe, will be an entirely different rafting experience. Due to the immense width of the imminent downstream channel of the Danube, which receives nearly 98 per cent of the river's water, he plans on leading us on a slightly more humble route, along the neighbouring Mosoni Duna, the 'Little Danube', what appears on our map as an impossibly tight and winding stream.

As the sun rises the following morning, we pack up and carry our gear down to the Mosoni Duna, squeezing through the

thick vegetation before launching into the fast-flowing river. Instead of straddling the border between Slovakia and Hungary, as the main river does, this far smaller waterway flows south, directly into northern Hungary.

A large island known as Szigetköz, which translates as the 'island alley', sits between the two river channels of water. At 375 square km, it's the largest island in Hungary, and is populated by verdant marshlands teeming with diverse bird life and seemingly never-ending fields of grain, pastures and sunflowers.

Where the main Danube was wide and industrial, the Mosoni Duna is narrow and meandering, heavily vegetated on both sides, and – whenever I intermittently halt my paddling – deadly quiet. The slow drip of water from paddles into the river below. The hiss of wind through a thick forest of reeds at the river edge. The distant cry of birds in the towering trees above. The gurgling of water, gently flowing over fallen trees and branches. Otherwise, utter silence.

REFUGEE RESCUE

'When I started considering crossing the whole continent, there was a hell of a lot in the news about the migration crisis going



Even the calmest of rivers can throw up unexpected obstacles

on at the same time,' recalls Rowe, as we wait out the intense heat of the midday sun at one of the various riverside campsites which follow the Mosoni Duna alongside its meandering course. He saw the expedition as a powerful opportunity to raise awareness for the plight of migrants trying to reach a safe haven somewhere on the continent. By linking with Refugee Rescue, a group working to aid the safe passage of refugees and asylum seekers, he hatched a plan to engage people all across Europe in conversations about immigration and the refugee debate.

The group have made several stops en route in order to participate in grassroots efforts to assist refugees, including volunteering at the food kitchens in Calais, as well as stopping in Ingolstadt, Germany, where they visited a special residence for juvenile refugees. 'That organisation, and infrastructure that's in place for them to become residents, to properly integrate them in as members of society and give them training, is fantastic,' adds Rowe, enthusiastically. 'I think the rest of Europe can take a leaf out of their book.'

PACKRAFTING PERILS

Our journey carries us pleasantly if

somewhat inefficiently in a southeasterly direction, meandering past settlements with dangerously tongue-twisting names like 'Mosonmagyaróvár'.

A centre of commerce in this region since the middle ages – especially in cattle exports – this settlement was once two, Moson and Magyaróvár, which were merged in 1939 to form the modern city of over 30,000 people. We briefly skim the outer rim, before again disappearing back down the thick, foresty waterway of the 'little Danube'.

All along the river, fallen trees clearly gnawed from the base indicate the constant presence of beavers. The banks teem with quizzical damselflies, their strikingly vivid shiny blue bodies glistening in the bright sunlight. New meanders frequently bring with them a grey herons standing at the waters edge, poised ready to fly off as soon as a raft gets too close. White storks fly slowly and silently overhead, their brilliantly white plumage contrasting sharply with their distinctive black wing tips.

As I quickly learn, packrafting requires constant mental concentration, even in these calm conditions. Obstacles are everywhere, from the myriad of dead and

broken wood emerging menacingly from the surface of the water, to the occasional fishing line, almost invisible to the unprepared eye. Navigating between these potential threats requires alertness and awareness, constantly manoeuvring the raft out of harms way.

SLOW TRAVEL

My week of packrafting passes lazily, as we gradually drift downstream towards the picturesque provincial capital of Győr, after which the Mosoni Duna eventually rejoins the main Danube river before heading east towards the capital Budapest. The concept of slow travel, taking the time to appreciate the landscape and natural environment we're passing through, feels like an integral component of this expedition. While overtly about humanitarianism and pro-internationalism, it's also a contemplative lesson in trusting that, for all the geopolitical tensions expressed on a daily basis in the media, most people remain welcoming to strangers, even sunburnt, nomadic folk who suddenly appear floating down the river in inflatable boats.

'I think going into any of these places with preconceived notions about a particular country, especially if they're negative, is just a dangerous thing to do,' muses Rowe, reeling off a string of incidents where they have been either fed, given shelter, or just generally greeted with open arms all along the journey. 'We just want to try and stay open-minded about the people we're going to meet. It's all just exploring, visiting places we've never gone, making it up as we go along, and we've got weird and wonderful people coming and joining us for all sorts of different sections of the trip. It's absolutely fantastic!'

■ Ninth Wave Global is an organisation aiming to bring together interdisciplinary individuals to facilitate humble and slow exploration of places and people, opening up space for recognition of shared humanity, needs and aspirations, culminating in concrete programmes of local-led, grass-roots development.

It is currently looking for participants for the Peruvian Amazon, Usumacinta, Hudson and Mississippi rivers, and sailboat journeys in the Dominican Republic and Antarctica, and is always looking for volunteers to work on environmental and social projects in Europe, the USA and Latin America. Anyone who's interested can start a conversation via info@ninthwaveglobal.com, or at www.ninthwaveglobal.com.

EXPLORE

TEN OF THE BEST

Packrafts piled high with rucksacks and drybags are the unavoidable reality of a journey such as this, hence size and weight were vitally important aspects to consider as Chris Fitch made his way along the Danube. Keeping kit dry and skin protected from the hot sun was also a top priority...

1 Tent

Ferrino Lightent 2 - £182, 1.65kg

When a giant swarm of blood-sucking mosquitoes is outside, a good quality tent becomes invaluable. The Ferrino Lightent is exactly what it says on the tin; light, airy and waterproof. Crucially, it is also very easy both to construct and to disassemble, even when night has already fallen.

2 Boots

Keen Westward - £90-£100, 502g

It's easy to be in-and-out of your raft ten or more times a day – especially when encountering barriers such as dams – or to be spending lots of time walking long distances around an obstacle. Hence, sturdy footwear is essential. The waterproof Keen Westwards are perfect; they don't obstruct you while paddling, and the breathable membrane mean your feet remain ventilated without letting in water.

3 Towel

Páramo Expedition - £20, 218g

When space is limited, but the need to frequently dry yourself is high, an towel such as Páramo's is ideal. Extremely lightweight and packing down very small, the special NIKWAX fabric has an asymmetrical design which quickly draws water from one side to the other.

4 Drybag

Aquapac Upano 70L waterproof duffel - £110, 714g

What could be more important than keeping your gear dry? Aquapac bags are specially designed for environments where the risk of expensive equipment getting accidentally tipped into the water is high. With plenty of storage space and soft straps for easy carrying when out of the water, the Aquapac Upano was an absolute lifesaver.

5 Packraft

Alpacka Denali Llama - \$925.00-\$1,925.00, 2.66-3.69kg

No one believes how small and light an Alpacka raft can be when packed away until they've tried it themselves. From a sturdy raft capable of carrying fully-grown adults plus kit, they can be shrunk to fit in the back of a rucksack.



DON'T FORGET...

a good book. When there's several hours of sweltering heat to wait out during the middle of the day before taking to the water again, it's the perfect opportunity for some quality summer reading.

6 Roll mat

Regatta Napa Ultralite - £30, 750g

Spending the night sleeping on a rocky, arid patch of ground, or a wooded area where the earth is littered with twigs and sticks? A good roll mat makes all the difference. The Regatta Napa Ultralite is quick and easy to blow up and deflate. I won't go camping without it.

7 Glasses strap

Chums Eyewear Retainer 5mm - £6.99, 8.5g

For the bespectacled among us, rafting of any kind tends to go hand-in-hand with a not-unreasonable fear that, were our glasses to fall into the water, they might well be forever lost to the river's flow, leaving us essentially paddling blind. Chums are a simple, comfortable, and affordable way of ensuring such a nightmare scenario never unfolds.

8 Hat

Sunday Afternoons Ponderosa - £57.95, 170g

I never expected temperatures in Hungary to be approaching 40°C, but this summer's European heatwave meant that we spent several hours openly exposed to a very powerful sun. Only my new favourite UPF 50+ hat by Sunday Afternoons kept me from returning from Hungary horribly sunburnt on the face and neck.

9 Paddle

Aqua Bound Manta Ray - \$109.95-\$189.95, 836g

There's a place it's famously not great to be without a paddle, and I had no desire to find myself there. An Aqua Bound paddle is strong, light, durable, and easily collapsible, arguably the ideal partner to an Alpacka raft. Make sure you have drip rings fitted to stop water from running down the stem constantly making your hands wet and slippery.

10 Stove

MSR XGK EX - £131.50, 372g

Not every Danube packrafting expedition will necessarily enjoy the quality of chef and cuisine that we did, but with a robust mobile stove such as the MSR XGK Expedition, the opportunity is at least on the metaphorical table. Essential for obeying rules such as Hungary's 'no open fires' laws, to prevent wildfires from taking off amid the heatwave.